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ABSTRACT

Communities of one sort or another are found in the literature of many disciplines and are used to explain any number of things: linguists examine language in terms of speech communities, while composition researchers write of discourse communities. Linguists have advanced various definitions of communities, but Stanley Fish's "Is There a Text in This Class?" shifts the focus from interpreting and producing speech to interpreting and producing written texts. Although Fish insists that texts are written before they are read, his theory is aimed at literary criticism and at the act of reading as determined by interpretive communities. When we try to communicate with members of a different community we have to deal with the fact that they use language in different ways, for different purposes. Educators occupy a special position as the experts in various fields--not to mention as representatives of the academic community at large, with its attendant values, methods, beliefs, and even disputes. Students have their own areas of expertise, but they often do not think like their teachers, who need to remember that they are not teaching students to think or speak or write, but rather to think, speak, or write to new communities and in other contexts. (NKA)

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What's All This Fuss About Communities?

I first encountered the concept of "community" in Stanley Fish's Is There A Text in This Class? I liked his concept of "interpretive communities"--it explained a lot and seemed new, yet so familiar and comfortable. I recognized myself immediately as a member of a number of interpretive communites which had influenced my writing and reading. But even after reading Fish I remained confused about just exactly what interpretive communities are. In subsequent years, I discovered that communities of one sort of another were to be found in the literature of many disciplines and that they were being used to explain any number of things. Linguists had been examining language in terms of speech communities; philosophers of science had been postulating the existence of argument or knowledge communities or epistemic discourse communities; composition researchers wrote of discourse communities. One educator, Kenneth Bruffee, had designed a collaborative learning composition course based on the assumption that students learn best in a "community of knowledgeable peers." In spite of these varying labels, it seemed to me that "community" was essentially the same theoretical concept being used in different contexts and with different emphases.

I'll start by reviewing some, though hardly all, of the uses of the concept of "community." I've tried to cover the major views of communities within a number of disciplines; I want to highlight Charles Willard's explanation of argument fields, as it's the most comprehensive and universal of the treatments of commmunity I've found.

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Bloomfield was among the first to use the term "speech community." As early as 1933 (*Language*), in what is now considered by linguists the "classic" sense, he described a speech community as "a group of people who interact by means of speech" (42), using the same "system of speech signals" in the same way (29). Boundaries of speech communities, he explains, may be drawn along many lines. By way of example, he cites social or economic class, level of education, technical occupation, participation in sports or hobbies or a religious group, age, geography, or membership in a criminal or vagabond group or a group that uses a secret dialect. It's already apparent that membership in a speech community isn't a simple matter.

As linguists acknowledged that language's function (how we use it) is as important as its structure, the notion of the speech community changed. Dell Hymes has characterized the speech community as "a repertoire of ways of speaking" (203), and he defines it "as a community sharing knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech. . . "(51). Speech communities, like languages, are "rule-governed." Hymes' definition of rules can be better understood in light of his explanation of what happens to intelligibility between people of different speech communities, between, say, a New York Jew and a speaker of BEV. He points out: "There may be persons whose English I could grammatically identify, but whose messages escape me. I may be ignorant of what counts as a coherent sequence, request, statement requiring an answer, situation requiring a greeting or making a greeting anomalous, requisite or forbidden topics, marking of emphasis or irony, normal duration of silence, normal level of voice, etc. . . ." (49). For linguists, then, the concept of speech community concerns how we use and interpret language according to our

degree of participation in a given community, a community that makes and promotes the sociolinguistic rules for using and interpreting language.

Hymes' "ways of speaking" is extended by ethnographers of speaking, like Shirley Brice Heath, to encompass a broader cultural view; she defines communities according to our "ways with words," that is, our ways of communicating, of educating our children, of thinking about literacy. Heath considers language only one aspect of a speech community. She explains: "The place of language in the cultural life of each social group is interdependent with the habits and values of behaving shared among members of that group."

In light of this history of communities in lingusitics, and in light of Fish's own background in linguistics, it became apparent to me that he hadn't invented the concept of interpretive communities as an act of individual genius. What he did do which was rather interesting was shift the focus from interpreting and producing speech to interpreting and, to a lesser extent, producing written texts. He stresses that interpretive communities "write" a text before they "read" it, that they contour "the shape of reading" (13). Fish says: "interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (14).

Although Fish insists that texts are written before they are read, his theory is aimed at literary criticism and at the act of reading as determined by interpretive communities. A few scholars from English departments have been more concerned with how the notion of community can be used to explain the nature of writing. Carolyn Miller borrows the

notion of community from philosophers of science in an article discussing the teaching of technical writing (1979). Acknowledging that "communication occurs in communities," she offers the following definition of technical writing: "We can define scientific writing as written communication based within a certain community and undertaken for certain communal reasons. Technical writing occurs within a somewhat different community for somewhat different reasons" (617). Miller suggests we can write a rhetoric of technical communication; to do so, we might look to, in her words, to "organizational and management theory, the sociology of technology, and the cultural history of industry and bureaucracy" (617). However, she doesn't limit her discussion to technical writing: "To write, to engage in any communication, is to particiapte in a community; to write well is to understand the conditions of one's own participation--the concepts, values, traditions, and style which permit identification with that community and determines the success or failure of communication" (617). Patricia Bizzell, who has a strong interest in composition studies, stresses the disparate elements of communication in her notion of a "discourse community." Hymes had described communicative events as consisting of the following components: "participants, channels, codes, settings, forms of messages and genres, attitudes and contexts that a message may convey or be about, and the events themselves" (10). Bizzell's use of discourse implies that the total communicative event is at play in a discourse community. Her definition, like Hymes', relies on the fact that discourse communities are bound to a large extent by convention. She explains:"Groups of society members can become accustomed to modifying each other's reasoning and language use in certain ways. Eventually, these familar ways achieve the

status of conventions that bind the group in a discourse community. . ." (159). She also recognizes the political dimension of communities when she reminds us that "access to the various communities will be unequally conditioned by [one's] social situation" (159). Both Miller and Bizzell maintain that writing is a process of learning the conventions and styles that allow participation, and thus communication, in a discourse community.

On another front, philosophers and sociologists of science, including Kuhn, Rorty, and Willard, have focused on the nature of knowledge and argument--resulting in their postulation of "knowledge communities," "epistemic discourse communities," or "argument fields." Scientific knowledge, according to Kuhn, is created when the community of scientists consent to accept something as such. This "community of knowledgeable peers" shares "assumptions, values, methods." Various sub-communities may, through a collaborative process, negotiate what constitutes scientific knowledge. Similarly, for Rorty, knowledge is the "social justification of belief." To be knowledgeable means to be able to comfortably converse within a community.

Charles Willard, whose definition I'd like to highlight because it applies to all the types of communities I've discussed, claims that argument fields are made up of actors and things around which actors unify. Others have called actors "participants" or "members." Actors are "multivalent" in that they move "from group to group, displaying different allegiances, and defining their actions in different ways" (p. 29). Actors may attend to a field as if they were audience members, in which case they're "participants," or they may speak for a field as expert members. But isn't enough for them to just be a group, as was implied in

Bloomfield's speech community, where actors simply shared a common system of linguistic signals. Willard explains, "Actors unify around beliefs, standards, rhetorical appeals, relationships, and political aims" (p. 28). As we saw in the case of speech communities, they also unify around "ways of speaking" and "ways with words," and in their attitudes toward speech.

Fields are of different types. Some are part of our everyday associations with friends, family, lovers, and people we confront in normal social situations--the store clerk, the librarian, the stranger on the bus. Some fields are normative in that they help shape our beliefs--our affiliations with a church, for example. The fields that are significant to those of us of an academic ilk, however, are what Willard calls "issue fields" or "schools of thought": "larger groupings based on paradigms, positions on issues" (p. 30). Willard further distinguishes between "ordinary" and "disciplinary" fields: "Ordinary fields are apt to take a body of knowledge for granted and to act upon it for political and social aims. Disciplines are apt to focus on making a body of knowledge better" (p.30).

Since we enter fields to achieve certain aims, we can further clarify what fields are by discovering why we enter them. Willard suggests a number of reasons. We may enter a "domain of objectivity" to check our reasoning against some set of established standards. We may enter a field to "butress claims," that is, to justify our beliefs. As Willard explains, "A Catholic theologian may enter [a] domain for its authority and a political activist might pick up and use the principles of a discipline to butress claims" (p.31). We may enter a field from a desire to attain "epistemic betterment." Or we may be influenced to enter a field as the result of

interaction with expert actors. Undoubtedly there are many reason for entering issue fields that Willard doesn't touch on.

When we enter a field, we do so with faith in its experts and standards. We follow what Willard dubs the "as if" maxim: "People treat schools of thought as if they are accomplished bodies of knowledge" (p. 39). Our main trust in a field stems from its experts, but it also stems from its standards, its methodology, its research traditions. Entering a field entails a certain loss of freedom in that our participation requires that we accept its authorities and standards. To varying degrees, we "surrender private alternatives." But we can freely choose which fields we will attend to and the hierarchy of value we will assign to them. For example, we may set a higher value on the beliefs we accept from mathematics than on those we accept from aesthetics.

Disputes between fields (interfield disputes) and within fields (intrafield disputes) can have many consequences: the creation of new fields and the death of dysfunctional fields being among the most radical. Sometimes disputes between fields can be resolved by borrowing concepts from other fields. When the experts of a field are challenged, its actors may make what Willard calls a "retreat to committment" or a "retreat to intuition." The latter amounts to a defense of the field on the grounds that it has a superior set of standards or derives greater authority from its experts. But Willard denies to any one field true superiority. Superiority exists only in the mind of the actor. Or, in the current lingo of literary criticism, ideology is blind.

Fields cannot be defined by documents, by membership in a professional association, by profession, or by discipline. There are great differences between members of the medical community or between

"structuralist" and "reader response" literary critics. Moreover, the documents of a field aren't self-explanatory because both the writer's and the reader's intentions must be understood before a document can accurately reflect the field. One must enter a field and be immersed in it to even hope to really understand its texts. Willard's explanation is that "Understanding texts . . . presupposes an accomplished sense of fields--which obviates using documents to define fields" (p. 56). Technical language presents other difficulties, since it's highly evocative and connotative. The more we understand a field, the better we understand not only the precise meaning of a technical term but also its imprecise meaning--it may reveal a particular bias or a world of particular applications. Conversely, the less we understand a field, the harder it is to penetrate by means of its texts.

But Willard, like Caroline Miller, suggests a methodology for the study of fields, with the hope that understanding a field will allow us to make good arguments and to communicate well within that field and, perhaps, to solve interfield and intrafield disputes. He insists on "perspective-taking," that is, becoming a participant observer in a field so that we can investigate its standards and interview its experts. The result would be a rhetoric of the field. With enough of these rhetorics on hand, we should be better equipped to teach effective communication within various disciplines.

So why all this fuss about communities? Because the concept of communities works, because it provides threorists of thought and communication with a powerful and convincing tool, one based in social reality. Our participation in communities explains many of our difficulties of communication, for example, why we may find others

unitelligible although they speak varieties of the same language. Linguists have attributed this unintelligibility to language attitudes--but perhaps the problem goes deeper. When we try to communicate with members of a different community we have to deal with the fact that they use language in different ways, for different purposes. Likewise, the concept of communities explains why, as Fish notes, seemingly competent literary critics can read the same text in entirely different ways and still have credibility within the profession. Their interpretations are colored by their community membership. For educators the notion of communities is equally powerful. Bruffee's claim that learning can best be achieved within a community of knowledgeable peers changes the classroom in radical ways. Our authority as teachers no longer rests on having the "right" answers; instead, we have knowledge of a repertoire of answers accepted by the community we represent in the classroom. We use our standing as educators to put us in a special position as the experts of our various fields--not to mention as representatives of the academic community at large, with its attendant values, methods, beliefs, and even disputes. Our authority lies more in our perspectives than in our ability to think or to find the "right" answers. When I hear English teachers claim that they are teaching their students to "think better" or to "think properly," I have to laugh at their egocentric view of knowledge. Our students have their own areas of expertise--within some communities they communicate and think with perfection and finesse. There's nothing wrong with their cognitive processes. What they often do not know how to do is think like us. We aren't teaching them how to think or speak or write--we're teaching them to think, speak, and write to new communites. We stumble along with them, teaching them blindly, showing them how to

write like we do, how to talk and read and think like we do--in the same way most of us learned. It's an initiation process, and we even have our own crude methods of hazing--tests, grades, sometimes ridicule ("Think! Use your head!" we admonish). This is all very well, as long as we remember that our students can indeed think and communicate in other contexts and that the context in which we teach won't be the only one in which they will, in their lifetimes, be expected to perform.

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